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Johnson: Foreign Service Farewell

By Karen De Witt

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With a stream of diplomatic posts behind him in China, Czechoslovakia, Thailand and Europe, U. Alexis Johnson said goodbye to the Foreign Service Monday. But not permanently.

"Oh, no," he said when asked whether his last day and the receipt of the Department of State Distinguished Honor Award meant full retirement. "We've got lots of things to do. We'll just have to see."

Nearly 200 people, including Ambassador-at-large Ellsworth Bunker, Mr. and Mrs. Donald Rumsfeld, and House International Relations Committee Chairman Clement J. Zablocki, came to honor Johnson, a man Secretary of State Cyrus Vance described as bringing "closeness and mutual understanding" to the Foreign Service.

Vance read a statement from former Secretary of State Dean Rusk who was unable to be present at the ceremony. Rusk called Johnson "a towering contributor in (his) 42-year career."

Johnson, who speaks fluent Japanese and French and understands Chinese, began his career in the Foreign Service initially as a language attache at the American embassy in Tokyo. He was vice counsel in Manchuria in 1939, held several ambassadorial posts in East Europe and the Far East, and was chief negotiator at the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks during the Nixon administration. His latest position was Ambassador-at-large.

After Monday's presentation of the ambassadorial flag and the honor award, Johnson quipped to Vance, "I have to call you Mr. Secretary until midnight, after that, I can call you Cy."

Johnson noted that in his long career in the Foreign Service, he'd actually had "25 different jobs. I don't know of anyplace (but the Foreign Service) where you can have that kind of experience."

Johnson complimented his personal and official staffs, saying, "We owe our country the best and I think this staff of the Foreign Service does that. I don't know anything I would rather have done."

Commenting to laughter that he didn't know whether "under the new rules and regulations one mentions that one has a wife," he thanked his wife, Pat, for "being a tremendous help through the years." In concluding, Johnson paraphrased Gen. Douglas MacArthur: "Old Foreign Service officers never die, just like the telegrams they write we're simply downgraded."